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Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Committee, my name is Barbara Kimble-Goodman. I am a Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner working in the Department of Corrections (DOC) for the past six years. I am submitting testimony today to request that all health care services for the Department of Corrections be adequately funded. During the time that I have worked for DOC the acuity of the inmates has increased. They are incarcerated for more serious crimes, more often felonies. There is even more need to be mindful of safety. In order to provide treatment, we first need to ensure safety. We need to meet basic needs first before we can expect the people we treat to engage. Making sure that there is safe staffing, sufficient equipment such as body alarms and radios, cameras and ample staff training are a must.

We need to be able to attract and retain staff that are interested and invested in working with this population. Staff need to be able to have a work life balance. They need to not have to worry about being mandated regularly, being exhausted, missing important life events with their families and not being able to plan for a day off. We cannot expect that our healthcare providers can provide quality services safely and proficiently under these circumstances. We need the funds to fill positions to meet immediate needs and positions to meet our community standard of care. We need funds to pay mental health and medical staff at a rate that is equal to their value.

Our incarcerated population is an aging population with multiple chronic health care issues. Many of these individuals are receiving health care services for previously undiagnosed health problems such as diabetes and hypertension. They need education on how to care for themselves and make positive choices, to learn about the medications that they take and how to take them. These things all take time and require that there are knowledgeable staff to give them that time.

We need to address the increase in the number and severity of mental health care needs. Corrections has already become a de facto mental health treatment facility with individuals with serious mental illness. We have the stress of incarceration and separation from family further impacted by the ongoing pandemic with increases in individuals experiencing anxiety and depression. Mental health staff need to be able to do more than provide crisis avoidance and immediate stress mitigation. We need enough mental health staff to provide groups to teach skills, for inmates to learn to accept feedback and for them to learn to understand another person's perspective. We need mental health staff to be able to provide pharmacologic and individual therapies to our inmate population. Our goal needs to be treatment and programing to assist the inmate' return to the community better than they left it. We talk about corrections and that means providing treatment and programing to ensure that the time people spend incarcerated leads to better outcomes and a better trajectory for them than the one they were on when they became incarcerated. By providing funding you can assist us in doing the quality work that we are capable of and strive to perform.

As staff at DOC, we don't have the ability to appeal to the community. There is stigma with mental health, compounded by the stigma of incarceration. Many members of the community don't think that they want their money going to incarcerated inmates, while at the same time forgetting that many of these individuals are human beings. We need more staff to assist our inmates' transition back into the community. Making sure that they have basics such as somewhere to stay, to get healthcare services, to get their mental health needs met, and that they have benefits in place to do all those things.

Thank you for your time.